

# THE HUMANITIES AND THE UNIVERSITY IN RUIN

John Mowitz - Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature - University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

## I.

My title makes a direct, if singular, reference to Bill Readings' 1996 study *The University in Ruins*, a text whose 15-year anniversary is now upon us. The reasons for this are several, but before delineating them permit me to state in very general terms what the following remarks are concerned to do. Seen from the heights of Table Mountain, without the cloth, my concerns engage the status of the humanities as part of the history of post-secondary education now that its traditional, largely Eurocentric legitimation—think here of Matthew Arnold's appeal to the categories of "sweetness and light" in *Culture and Anarchy*—has given way to a contemporary neo-liberal legitimation wherein the humanities is valued for producing "flexible" and "multiply skilled" worker/citizens for the new global economy. Although Arnold's view could never effectively hide its compensatory character, that is, its valuation of cultural expression as the means by which to console those torn by social conflicts falsely deemed unsurpassable, the neo-liberal paradigm has demanded that—in a distinctly therapeutic discourse—we simply "get over" our despair about such conflicts and cynically craft, using the available technologies, cultural micro-climates for private use. Taste and literacy converge in becoming utterly personal.

The view advanced and defended here is that this situation—the choice itself—is intolerable, perhaps even unlivable. What is called for, however, is not yet another defense of the humanities, but something more fundamental and for that reason more difficult.

To clarify what I am attempting to get at in saying this I want to take up briefly a very important recent statement on the matter of the humanities. I am thinking of Mahmood Mamdani's "The Importance of Research in a University," a text that takes a bold, if conflicted, stand on the centrality of the humanities to the university in Africa. Aware that Mamdani's status in such debates is in certain respects complicated by the recent controversy surrounding the proposed closure of the Center for African Studies at UCT—a debate about which I know embarrassingly little—I will zero in only on those moments in this particular statement that help me clarify the purpose of my intervention.

Mamdani advocates that, "we have no choice but to train postgraduate students in the very institutions in which they will have to work," a view given autobiographical weight and one designed to address the longstanding problem of the "brain drain" to the North and West. Although by the end of his statement Mamdani importantly problematizes the intellectual character of the local/global distinction presumed at the outset, he takes productive aim at the problem of what he terms, "consultancy," that is, the propensity within Africa—and the continentalism is his, not mine—to reduce research to the largely empirical project of either confirming or challenging research paradigms produced elsewhere. Against the consultant who is a master of nothing, Mamdani calls for the indigenous production and reproduction of experts, experts who would be involved in original research.

In fleshing out what original research might encompass, Mamdani offers the following important evaluation of humanistic inquiry. "In a university, there needs to be room for both applied research, meaning policy oriented research, and basic research. The distinction is this: unlike

applied research which is preoccupied with making recommendations, the point of basic research is to identify and question assumptions that drive the very process of knowledge production." Describing the Makerere Institute of Social Research he characterizes the dual engagement of a proper research program by saying, "on the one hand [it involves] a critical engagement with the society at large, and on the other a critical grasp of disciplinary literature, world wide, so as to identify key debates within the literature and locate specific queries within those debates." In characterizing these formulations as "important" I mean especially to underscore Mamdani's insistent appeal to "critical engagement" as a way to think about what is distinctive to research that is humanistic. However, in placing the accent here, I can also indicate what separates my own remarks from Mamdani. Put concisely, what strikes me as underdeveloped in his discussion, is not the distinction between quantitative versus critical research, but an account of the *work* of "research" that grasps what constitutes its distinctly humanistic value. This is presupposed in Mamdani's nimble glide from "basic research" to the humanities, but it is left unelaborated.

To be clear: **what I am concerned to do here** is to consider how a "value" for the humanities that appeals neither to Arnoldian Eurocentrism, nor contemporary neo-liberalism, can be teased out of an account of the character of the *labor* involved in what Mamdani is calling "research."

## II.

The "class of '68." This somewhat impish designation for what is also known as French Theory, is, when not simply an object of ridicule, fast becoming a mere term of endearment. Before this process arrives at the zero degree of affect, it seems useful—perhaps now more than ever—to recall that beyond simply grouping a generation of academic intellectuals together, this formulation also foregrounds an important fact. It reminds us that French Theory belonged to the structural crisis of the French university. By this I do not mean that French Theory was either the cause or the effect of this crisis. But rather, that it was interwoven with this crisis and as such invites us to recognize that many of its signature preoccupations not only bear directly on the nature of the university, but they also, for that very reason, retain a certain immediate pertinence for those working to sort the current fate of the university as a socio-epistemological institution. At the risk of stirring an old post, recall that Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* was a study, commissioned by the *Conseil des Universités* in Quebec, written to, among other things, reorient and rethink the research activities of the Western university. Or, to take another example, that much of Jacques Derrida's voluminous writings on the university, including his unsettling reading of Kant's "The Conflict of the Faculties" emerged from his activities within GREPH, the group for research into the teaching of philosophy that formed in response to a ministerial recommendation that philosophy instruction be removed from high schools. Of course, the international student movement of the 1960s resonated profoundly in various national theoretical and political contexts but in the French case, **the snarl between theory and the university** seems hidden in plain view.

Perhaps the most sustained articulation of this snarl remains Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*. Because this text has been so thoroughly combed (at least in the US context), I want to approach it by, as it were, brushing it against the grain. Consider in this spirit the final three sentences of Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*:

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last. (*Origin* 235)

These lines, like most, say more than they mean, and certainly more than can be addressed in a short lecture, so I will simply observe that Readings' study has prompted us to hear in their melancholic strains something urgent about the contemporary fate of the university, and this regardless of whether the buildings on your campus qualify as great.

To amplify these strains I digress. My early writing placed strong emphasis on the connection forged by Michel Foucault between "disciplinary power," and *the* disciplines, that is, those institutionally organized practices that we simultaneously elevate and debase by referring to them as "academic." At the time, this derivative innovation in the sociology of knowledge seemed important largely because of the way it helped bring the anti-disciplinarity of textuality to light. Missing from this discussion, however, was the attention brought to Foucault's concept of disciplinary power first by Gilles Deleuze and later by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. This attention spawned a structural, even historical distinction between discipline and *control*, a distinction that, in the hands of Hardt and Negri was put to work to, among other things, cast light on Marx's distinction between the formal and real subsumption of labor under capital. There is, of course, much to discuss here but for my purposes what Deleuze's emphasis prompts is careful consideration of what happens to *the* disciplines with the advent of the society of control, with **the advent of the real subsumption of labor under capital**, or expressed in the language of contemporary public policy, neo-liberalism.

Marx himself provided important if unwitting insight on the matter when in elaborating the related, and under-valued, distinction between productive and unproductive labor he wrote:

A schoolmaster who instructs others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who works for wages in an institution along with others, using his own labor to increase the money of the entrepreneur who owns the knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker. But for the most part, work of this sort has scarcely reached the stage of being subsumed even formally under capital and belongs essentially to a transitional stage.  
(*Capital* 1044)

As a reiteration of a parallel he earlier draws between professors and masters within the context of guild production (1029), the later formulation invites one to consider both whether with the advent of the global society of control, school teaching *in fact* remains lost in transition somewhere between the pre-formal, the formal and the real subsumption of labor, but also to what extent and with what significance does education factor, and factor decisively in Marx's thinking about the becoming real, of formal subsumption. Now, from where I sit the so-called transition is over. **The university is a "knowledge-mongering institution"** and school teaching is largely productive labor, which is precisely why syndicalism has asserted itself with urgency, if not success, in so many corners of the educational field, but also, more ominously why the drumbeat of "deliverables" or "outcomes," has become tortuously loud.

At the risk of squandering whatever good will these remarks may have generated, I turn now to a speech given over 75 years ago, namely, Martin Heidegger's Rectoral Address, "On the Self-Assertion of the German University." This much raked over address draws out a hypnotically suggestive connection between the university and *the* disciplines. Arguing that to be worthy of "self-assertion" the university must engage in a vigorous form of self-examination, Heidegger goes on to specify that self-examination ought properly assume the form of a questioning that, "shatters the division of the sciences into rigidly separated specialties," and, "carries them back from their endless and aimless dispersal into isolated fields and corners" ("Self-Assertion" 474). That he is thus binding self-assertion/examination and what we would call interdisciplinarity is perfectly clear. So too, alas, are the political grounds of his questioning. But we need not endorse his studied ignorance of German politics in the 1930s to realize that precisely what neo-liberalism has achieved within all precincts of public education, K through 16 and beyond, is the ruin of the conditions of possibility for what Heidegger calls "self-assertion." It has done so, and this is crucial, not by defeating or

overcoming "self-assertion," but by metabolizing and thus neutralizing both it and the interdisciplinary re-structuring of knowledge it heralded. How? By folding the relation of the university to its outside (say, the church or the state) inward. Self assertion succumbs to the compromising vagaries of so called shared or faculty governance. In this sense, however controversial "self-assertion" may have sounded at the time, it has revealed itself to be little more than a *re-assertion* of Immanuel Kant's ill-conceived Faustian pact with Frederick II, the pact whereby access to enlightenment was secured by exchanging private service for public freedom.

One might well argue, indeed I am prepared to argue, that *this* is the deep form of the public that the neo-liberal call for economic privatization is designed to re-structure. Surely this, at least in the US context, is what is at stake in the systematic weakening of tenure, in the uncontrolled proliferation of adjuncts, professional administrative appointments and part-timers, in the legislative obsession with graduation rates and progress toward degrees, in the near hysterical resistance to syndicalism (especially in the public sector), in the unrelenting administrative rhetoric of "excellence" and "best practices," and, perhaps most cynically of all in what David Horowitz refers to as the Academic Bill of Rights, that is, the farcical repetition of the tragedy of the 1960s when students in the US and elsewhere sought empowerment by making common cause with other social movements antagonized by the structural adjustments of Empire, not, as is now the case, by litigating over grades or a chimerical absence of balance on course syllabi.

Put simply, academic intellectuals are encamped in the "self-assertive" university that now stands in the ruins for which it had been destined. Inside, strewn in some forensically legible blast pattern are to be found the "interdisciplinarity," "internationalism" and "diversity" that are fast becoming buzzing beacons of banality. To catch hold of the new beauty that flares up at this moment of danger, to redeem the idea of the plan silhouetted by the ruins of this university, it will take different concepts in the hands of differently organized "re: workers."

### III.

So how precisely should we conceive these re: workers? This term I derive from "re: working" which I spell, "re, colon, space, working." In the book I have just completed, *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception*, I propose to use re: working as a novel way to translate Bertolt Brecht's concept of *umfunktionierung*. More typically, this term is translated either as re-functioning or repurposing, perhaps even reconstructing, all perfectly reasonable choices except for the fact that they fail to capture an important theoretical, even political resonance of the term. Specifically, they drop the reflexivity that mattered to Brecht, a reflexivity that allowed him to suggest that "re: working" radio, had to be as much about radio as about *work* itself. In effect, radio implicates the labor of our reflection about it in the effort to recast its purpose.

Thus, re: workers. Workers as objects of reflection, but at the same time, workers as subjects caught up in the labor of reflection, of repeating themselves differently. To save time, let me simply assert that an important step has been taken down the path I wish to extend by university theorists in the US like Marc Bousquet and Jeffrey Williams (to pick out two prominent figures), scholars who have insisted that we hear fully the word "worker" in the phrase, "student worker." With compassionate rigor they have, in effect, re: worked the concept of the student by establishing how fully higher education now takes place in the context of a thoroughly neo-liberalized industry that services a clientele of future employees who are plunging ever deeper into debt to secure degrees of ever shrinking economic value. Among the many virtues of this work is that it has helped to politicize, in albeit narrowly economic terms, **the social being named "student worker,"** yet as crucial as such gains are they risk everything when we too glibly assume that they authorize rewording placards that read, "I Support University Workers," to

read, "I am a University Worker," where crucial differences are allowed to go unspoken by the convenient urgencies of solidarity.

So allow me to repeat a criticism Bosquet et al. have already heard, namely, by treating the phrase "student workers" as a pleonasm doesn't one effectively risk factoring the student out of the equation? While it is certainly true that far more attention has been paid to the student as a bearer of cultural literacy or a builder of the nation, this is no justification for abandoning an opportunity to re: work what "student" might mean now that we have taken the step of thinking with agonizing, not to say dispiriting clarity its relation to the social division of labor. Yes, students work, they are part of the system of wage and salaried labor, but how precisely are we to think this fact in the event of the specific *labor of studying*? This seems to me to be the precise theoretical challenge before us and not only because it represents a move as yet untaken in an argument that concerns us all.

So what would it mean to think students as re: workers, to grasp those who study—and I put it this way to implicate the entire field of "intellectual labor"—what would it mean to re: work the work of study? Two approaches suggest themselves and time will oblige me merely to sketch them. The first looms up in those heated conversations prompted by sympathy strikes where students, typically undergraduate students, accuse their teachers (often themselves graduate students) with exploiting them, with taking something from them that is not rightfully theirs to take. This is a discussion, perhaps more prevalent in the US than elsewhere, whose political valences would be easier to crystallize if we spent some time attempting to detail what Marx meant when, as we have seen, he indexed the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of value to the industrialization of education. Yes, let's be clearer about what real subsumption means, but even more important is grasping and documenting the event of real subsumption as it participates in the extraction of surplus value from educational labor, including the labor of studying. The Weberian "economy of prestige" has perhaps been given a new and decisive relevance by neo-liberalism's fatal attention to performance indicators such as the grade point averages and degree completion rates of student cohorts. The expropriation, or second enclosure of such indices, is routinely used on the academic market to establish comparative advantages over institutional competitors. In effect, surplus value *is* being extracted from so-called unproductive (intellectual) labor and this produces a link between students and workers that has only the most oblique relation to their jobs.

The second approach involves steering between two tempting, but I think, failed options. Both involve re: working work *as such*. On the one hand, there is the Italian workerist position. This has roots that extend back to Paul Lafargue and his "right to laziness," but which in the hands of Mario Tronti and more recently Negri, pressures the concept and practice of work within the capitalist division of labor by, when all is said and done, simply refusing to perform it, by, in effect, conflating work with the effort to boycott it. Although the mediating steps would be time-consuming to trace, one might subsume *this* re: working of work under the heading of George Bataille's "economy of expenditure." All its many attractions notwithstanding, and to be sure "the refusal to study" has become something of a competitive sport in the US, it should be clear that sooner or later this approach—if grasped in and as the event of studying—cedes the university to the asses of vocationalization that can already be heard braying at its gates. When study simply reverts to training, something important to students is irrevocably squandered. And not in a good way.

On the other hand, there is the option roundly criticized by Jacques Donzelot, and Robert Castel among others. It is likewise a re: working of work. Not by refusing it, but by enjoying it. Although it would take too long to elaborate in detail, Donzelot, in a series of papers from the late 70s, showed with compelling force precisely how the "pleasure in work" movement developed in France to manage, both ideologically and technically, the subsumption of "the social" by economic processes shared an alarming affinity with the "joy in work" rhetoric of the concentration camps of WWII. The immediate target of his criticisms was proposals circulating in

Paris for protecting workers from the erosion of their statutory relation to their jobs, proposals that insisted monotonously on the virtues of "permanent retraining" and preventive medicine (largely managing stress and controlling depression). But in generating the genealogy of such proposals Donzelot set in motion concepts that urge us to locate the work of studying within it. Especially important is not just the matter of retraining—are students, especially those in the humanities, not routinely told that employers are keenly interested in their ability to learn and relearn?—but in addition, the rather crucial matter of grasping the place of pleasure in intellectual work. However, in his eagerness to alert us to the risks of succumbing to a fully calculated and therefore suspicious "enjoying what one does for a living," Donzelot settles for an estrangement that only partially illuminates the re: working of study where, in fact, something like intellectual enjoyment *does* abide. That said, what Donzelot does help us think is the place of something other than the satisfaction of need in the event of work, a thought Marx himself, in basing use value on need, struggled to grasp.

Thus, if theoretical attention to the marketing of student performance constitutes a first approach to re: working study, then the second approach might well be directed at the socially conditioned space *between* boycotting and enjoying work. In other words, if we want to be clearer about what re: working the work of the student might mean, then we need to articulate in political terms the difference between refusing and enjoying work as it arises in the event of studying. Put differently, we need to grasp the value of what humanists do when they do it.

## IV.

When in 1971, Foucault was lured away from Philosophy at Vincennes he urged those attending his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France to remember that a "real escape from Hegel presupposes [. . .] a knowledge of what is still Hegelian in that which allows us to think against Hegel." (Foucault 74) I invoke this memory not primarily to draw final attention to another decisive encounter between the "class of '68" and the Parisian university system, but to urge that Hegel's concept, found already in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*, of the "labor of the negative" may help us tease out a practice suspended between refusal and pleasure, a practice that re: works the work of study, and in doing so gives us a way to value the work of the humanities beyond the impasses of Eurocentrism and neo-liberalism.

In the *Phenomenology* the "labor of the negative" (81) appears when, clearly sparring with Spinoza, Hegel establishes the difference between substance and subject, by asserting that divine intelligence without the "labor of the negative" devolves into edification. Theology, not science. What science, and his word is *Wissenschaft*, requires is a struggle between knowing and being, a struggle based in negation where the life of the mind advances by assimilating the object and negating the identity between the subject and the object produced through that assimilation. If, as he will go immediately on to say the "truth is the whole" this is because the whole emerges in and through this struggle. These days, of course, we find terms like science, truth, whole, quaint, perhaps even suspicious. But, if we hear faintly rumbling behind them the "labor of the negative" that, for Hegel, is a defining characteristic of the life of mind, then perhaps we have secured new purchase on the *work* of study. Between refusal and pleasure lies negation.

In a sense, Plato had defended the philosophical vocation in similar terms. In *The Republic* he proposes that the value of the life of the mind derives precisely from its *uselessness*, a term taken up centuries later by the founders of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton to designate the power and importance of "pure research." However, what Hegel's formulation gains is an important and explicit reference to "work," to "labor." So much so, in fact, that "the labor of the negative," can be understood to enter into a fecund relation with what Marx called "unproductive" labor, that is, labor thought to expend rather than produce surplus value. For Marx, unproductive labor reached beyond mere consumption (the using up of things of value) to



embody a logic that negated that of productive labor, a fact that helps explain the political danger of its real subsumption within capital.

In *The University in Ruins* this general line of reasoning is taken up under the rather different heading of what Readings calls "dissensus," that is, the non-objective or goal of academic inquiry freed from the quantitative pressures of producing consensus. While this maneuver feels a bit too tidy for me (not to mention that my colleagues have *long* been masters of dissensus), I appreciate Readings' insistence on the debate over the concept of community from which his insight is derived. Because this debate sought to counter the assumptions of Hegelian and later Marxian sociology (the family or class as defining instances of the social), it also prompts one to hesitate before the concept of negation at work within the "labor of the negative." What prompts this hesitation? In a word, death. A final citation from Hegel's *Phenomenology* will justify the melodrama of this assertion.

[T]he life of the mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder. It is this mighty power, not by being a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of anything it is nothing or it is false, and, being done with it, pass off to something else: on the contrary, mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it. (93)

Hegel goes on to clarify that this account of the negative belongs to the very core of his theory of the subject, establishing beyond a doubt that he is not here formulating a therapeutic "acknowledgement of death," but instead producing an ontological structure of death that locates it at the very tip of the spear where consciousness and matter meet in being torn apart. Taken then as part of what is understood as "the labor of the negative," we not only are compelled to grasp it as a synonym for "the life of the mind," but we are likewise compelled to equate negation and death and conceive "the labor of the negative" as something like the work of death. Although his immediate concerns are different, Achille Mbembe raised related issues when he said in an interview with the French journal of Catholic opinion, *Esprit*:

The totem which colonized peoples discovered behind the mask of humanism and universalism was not only deaf and blind most of the time, it was also, above all, characterized by the desire for its own death, but insofar as this death was necessarily conveyed through that of others, its was a delegated death. ("What" 2/13).

While **this necropolitical reading of humanism** reminds us to recognize Hegel as a European, it also lets slip, perhaps through its "ablist" assumptions, the provocative ontology of thought Hegel is attempting to establish. That said, and setting aside Freud's rewording of the death drive as the pleasure principle, it strikes me that however appealing Hegel's "labor of the negative" might be as a way to re: work the work of study, the work of the humanities, it invites a necessary embrace of human finitude that risks de-secularizing the humanities in a rather unhelpful way. Thus, it might therefore make more sense, and with this I will conclude, to engage another figure whose works routinely appeared on the syllabi of the "Class of '68," namely Friedrich Nietzsche. Specifically, what everyone from Bataille to Deleuze responded to in Nietzsche was **his insistence upon the power of affirmation**, not by any means a saying yes to anything and everything, but an embrace of the continuity between consciousness and matter that the dialectic (whether Hegelian or Marxist) promised to restore only by first negating. There is, of course, an enormous amount to say here, but so as not leave you both exhausted and perplexed, let me propose that we re: work the work of study, of research (to invoke Mamdani) as a "labor of affirmation." That is, as a practice arising wherever and whenever the human is at stake, a practice that grounds the critique of quantification and consultancy in a mode of activity that exceeds them. The point is not simply to assign a new value to the humanities, to shift its ranking in the great chain of being, but to re-open the dossier on value and to affirm the urgency of wresting value away from both its cultural and economic degradation within

societies of control. In the process we will not only be saying yes to the labor of study, but to the space and project of the university whether in Africa or elsewhere. If we can formulate what the humanities does, perhaps we will also know where it must take place. In this respect Benjamin got it backwards: it is not the plan of great buildings that shine forth in their ruins, but the building of great plans that give ruin what value it has whether on the first day or the last.

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# RESPONSE TO JOHN MOWITT'S "HUMANITIES AND THE UNIVERSITY IN RUIN"

Morgan Adamson - Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature - University of Minnesota

In "The Humanities and the University in Ruin," John Mowitt, calls for a radical rearticulation of the value of the humanities in the tradition of Bill Reading's *University in Ruin*. On the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of Reading's landmark work, Mowitt suggests that from the rubble of the modern university has arisen, "a contemporary neo-liberal legitimization wherein the humanities is valued for producing 'flexible' and 'multiply skilled' worker/citizens for the new global economy." For Mowitt, the dogma of neo-liberalism has emerged as the primary legitimating discourse for the humanities, as the university has lost its function as the proprietor of national culture with the decline of the nation state. Given the crisis of legitimization that the liberal arts have undergone, and the context of the control societies within which they persist, Mowitt takes on the daunting task of reasserting the value of the humanities outside of both state and neo-liberal discourses. In doing so, he argues against recent trends in critical university studies that highlight the question of intellectual labor. Particularly, he critiques the formulation of the student-worker a-la Marc Bousquet and others for emphasizing the question of work at the expense of the activity of study, arguing that this emphasis runs the risk of generating a politics of refusal that forecloses our ability to affirm the humanities in our present. To underscore the question of intellectual labor as labor in the tradition of Italian workerism, for Mowitt, ignores the intrinsic value of study, the distinct and defining character of what it is that the humanities do that cannot be fully accounted for by the category of work. In this way, Mowitt's argument echoes Readings, who writes at the end of *The University in Ruins* that we must "dwell in the ruins without belief, but with a commitment to Thought" (175). For Readings, this thought is non-productive, wasteful, and outside of that which can be calculated on the university's balance sheets. Mowitt reasserts a commitment to thought, a thought that is not intrinsically tied to questions of labor or utility, but is affirmative of itself. In a university where thought within the humanities has been reanimated and put to the ends of neo-liberalism, we must, according to Mowitt, "re-open the dossier on value and to affirm the urgency of wresting value away from both its cultural and economic degradation within societies of control." This affirmation forms the basis for a politics that works against **the insidious trends of the neo-liberal university** that would have us do away with Thought altogether.

And as we dwell in the ruins of the university with its shiny and new neo-liberal ornamentation, is it not precisely thought that seems to be under attack at every turn? At my and Mowitt's home institution, the University of Minnesota, the central administration has branded the university "Driven to Discover," as it forwards a radical agenda to restructure the College of Liberal arts with department closures and mergers that seem to have little to do with any coherent intellectual project, but instead enforce an administered interdisciplinarity. In the new college of liberal arts, the humanities is relegated to the most servile of positions in order to cut administrative and instructional costs even further and to make the practitioners of thought into ever more flexible workers. The financial crisis, it seems, has afforded my institution, like many others, the opportunity to enact a series of structural adjustments, the blueprints for which seem to have been lying in the bureau drawer of an administrator waiting for a crisis like the one we are currently living through to take form. As the hallowed halls of liberal arts lie in ruin, shrines to anti-thought are erected everywhere including a new wing of

the business school, institutes of biotechnology and the like, etc. Indeed, there seems to be a direct correlation between these two phenomena. As Chris Newfield has shown in *The Unmaking of the Public University*, over the past several decades, research institutions have developed accounting mechanisms to systematically siphon off tuition money from the liberal arts in order to fund their techno-scientific enterprises.

Mowitt and others seem to suggest that the crisis of the university we are presently living through might be thought of as the final battle being played out between the forces within the university set forth in Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*. In Kant's formative articulation, this battle is played out between the lower faculty, the philosophers and guardians of pure reason, and the practitioners of practical reason, whose research is always subject to an external, utilitarian end. Now, left with nothing but a set of neo-liberal clichés, the lower faculty have lost the legitimation that Humboldt assigned to them, nothing less than the "spiritual and moral training of the nation," and "science for its own sake," as Humboldt called it, is inevitably on the decline. This crisis of legitimation, well charted in Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, is the crisis that lies at the heart of both Readings and Mowitt's analysis of the postmodern and neo-liberal universities, respectively. So, then, we must be clear, when speaking of the crisis of the contemporary university, is this crisis of legitimation the crisis to which we are referring? Is not the aforementioned conflict between two forms of knowledge at the center of contemporary struggles over the university? Historically, taking up the defense of thought against the encroachment of the utilitarian and techno-scientific regime of knowledge has been a powerful mode of positioning leftist political struggles within the university and beyond. From Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques of instrumental reason to the March 22nd manifesto in Paris against the technocratic university, widely circulated during the iconic events of May 1968, a rejection of trends towards the domination of practical reason in the modern university has formed the basis leftist political movements in the struggle over higher education. An important contribution of Mowitt's argument is that it recasts the conflict of the faculties in light of what he rightly identifies as **a new regime of power within societies of control**.

While acknowledging the significance of these struggles, I must pose the following question: is the conflict among faculties set forward by Kant the most adequate way of understanding our contemporary situation? Put differently: what is effaced when we conceive of the "crisis of the university" and the "crisis of the humanities" as one and the same thing? I pose this question here because it is a question that I have been compelled to pose to myself over the past year. After completing my degree in Comparative Literature in January, I took a job as a staff organizer for the United Auto Workers who are currently engaged in a campaign to unionize the graduate assistants at the University of Minnesota. This job took me into the bowels of the buildings that house the enormous scientific, medical, and engineering research complexes that I previously regarded with the utmost disdain. What I found in these spaces, however, was not at all what I was expecting. In organizing the research assistants in the science and engineering departments, I encountered not the self-assured scientists bathing in corporate grant money; instead, I talked to countless students, the majority of them international, working endless hours in the lab carrying out the research of major corporations while earning less than a living wage. I heard horror story after horror story of poor and even dangerous working conditions, horrendous hours, PIs who forbade their graduate assistants from taking vacation, and violations of intellectual property rights that highlighted the intensely precarious nature of the labor of those who carry out the bulk of the actual research that goes on in the applied sciences. Many of these workers in the cognitariat that makes up a large portion of the neo-liberal university are our allies and critical thinkers of higher education in their own right. The most surprising thing to me about these encounters, however, was that in my years of writing and organizing around university politics and labor, I had failed to fully consider working conditions within the sciences. Being a product of the under-funded humanities and what I saw as

the university's systematic assault on thought, these questions remained, for me, unthought. In addition to these revelations, I found that those in science and engineering programs often shared the same suspicion and outright hatred of the liberal arts as we had for them. I began to wonder whether or not the perpetuation of this conflict, this division, this battle among the faculties served the interests of the central administration more than the parties involved, furthering a discourse of scarcity that understands survival within the contemporary university as a zero sum game. As these encounters brought me to the limits of my thought, they also expose the limits, or perhaps the unthought, of a particular form of university politics. Is there a possibility to bring together a politics that asserts the value of the humanities with labor struggles in the university in a way that does not reinscribe divisions and hierarchies within forms of knowledge? The difficulty of such a political project is registered in Mowitt's analysis of [the crisis of legitimation within the humanities](#), and presents itself as somewhat of an aporia.

What is clear is that we cannot imagine a form of knowledge that is outside of the material conditions of its production, a point with which Mowitt would agree. As I have argued elsewhere, the contemporary university is a testing ground for the financial control of cognitive labor. The university is an institution at the forefront of harnessing intellectual labor for the growth of what has been termed the "knowledge economy" not only through the production of knowledge commodities, but through the generation of set of ever-new sets of metrics to constantly measure, assess, quantify, and invest in intellectual labor. At the same time, the university is an innovator in deploying cutting-edge techniques for the creation and management of an ever more precarious, low-paid, and flexible workforce. Moreover, the university is a site through which the mechanisms of financial control have encroached on intellectual life through its facilitation of what I and others have argued is the most virulent and exploitative form of consumer debt in America, student loans. Through the system of predatory lending facilitated by the university, that which was thought to be outside of intellectual life has become its deepest internal limit; finance has been folded into the life of the mind. As the form of the contemporary university becomes ever more an expression these processes, we must revisit the underlying conditions of our thought and its unthought in order to create a politics based the resistance to the financialization of knowledge generally and the increasingly precarious conditions under which it is produced. What Mowitt adds to ongoing conversations around the university is an insistence that those of us in the humanities not lose sight of what it is we are struggling for, which cannot be reduced to better wages and the like, but is, importantly, the power to affirm the singular nature of our thinking beyond capital's ability to measure it. Though Mowitt distances himself from thinkers of intellectual labor, his argument that we "re:work" study as a "labor of affirmation" seems to resonate with what Gigi Roggero calls "living knowledge," a form of knowledge that, like living labor, does not need the legitimation of capital in order to affirm itself.

# RESPONSE TO JOHN MOWITT'S "HUMANITIES AND THE UNIVERSITY IN RUIN" [\*]

Adam Sitze - Black Studies and Law, Jurisprudence and Social Thought - Amherst College

John Mowitt's "The Humanities and the University in Ruins" unfolds with characteristic precision, elegance, and insight. Inviting his reader to desire a humanities that will have emancipated its inquiries from the two great forces that stifle it today, neoliberal political economy and Eurocentric knowledge production, Mowitt also steps aside from the rhetoric of crisis that for so long has been such an uncritically automatic part of the self-understanding of the humanities. Mowitt instead raises the question of the humanities within a much different lexicon, a lexicon some readers may be tempted to regard as not only heterodox but also antiquated: the labor theory of value. The result is a problematization of the humanities the central questions of which no longer derive from the rhetoric of crisis ("who are the internal and external enemies against whom the humanities must 'defend' itself?") but now in a much different set of questions, questions the difficulty of which makes the rhetoric of crisis seem consoling by contrast: What sort of labor is it that's entailed in the scholarly work of the humanities? What is it, exactly, that humanists do when they work? How is that work different than other sorts of work that takes place inside and outside of the late modern university? And what relation might exist between this work and the sorts of work and worklessness we witness today, in this moment of high crisis for late capitalism?

## 1.

Begin with the obvious: there's no lack of cause today for humanists to feel menaced. We read these days about the threat posed to the humanities by the invading forces of neoliberalism and market logic, on the one hand, and instrumental reason and the applied sciences, on the other hand. We read of the corporatisation and privatisation of the university, and the poisonous effects those processes have upon the humanities (whether it be the rising costs of books and tuition for students, or the inability of talented graduate students to find the permanent teaching positions they need in order to be able to do their work as researchers and teachers). We read of aggressive proposals to save the university (whether by "emancipating" it of its ostensibly outdated desire to unify knowledge under the rubric of the terminal B.A. degree, or by casting it into the sea of the Internet). And we read stories, seemingly increasing by the day, of administrators who arbitrarily and summarily close down humanities programs that allegedly cannot pay for their own operation costs, and that are said, with shockingly little evidence, to be a drain on limited institutional resources.

Confronted by all of this, one can understand why a self-identified humanist would feel compelled to defend the humanities, and in particular to defend the humanities to the public. And not just any public, but a specific public, the public figured as a *taxpaying* public, a public the definitive hallmark of which is its desire to know what exactly it's receiving in exchange for its annual contributions to state and federal government. [1] By defending itself to the public so understood, the humanities presumably would be able to explain the indispensability of scholarly work that otherwise would risk appearing perfectly dispensable. And it should come as no surprise that many humanists recently have done just this, dutifully explaining to their readers that humanists are those who ask what it means to be human; who preserve and transmit to future generations the best that has been thought and said; who

interpret texts from the past in their proper cultural and historical context; and who teach the habits of self-reflection and self-critique that are essential for any virtuous citizenship, especially for the sort of citizenship we imagine existing in the global age.

What's so curious about accounts of this sort, however, is how consistently the humanists who offer them betray, precisely in *the way* they offer their accounts, the very habits of thought they attempt to affirm *within* those same accounts. For example, defenders of the humanities sometimes like to quote *The Apology of Socrates* in support of the assertion that the essence of humanistic education is the discipline of constant self-examination, self-questioning, and self-criticism: "the unexamined life [*anexetastos bios*] is not worth living for a human being [*biōtos anthrōpōi*]." [2] And yet when the erstwhile defenders of the examined life find themselves questioned by the "taxpaying public," they oddly leave the concept of taxation precisely unexamined. The strangeness of this situation hardly can be underestimated: those who seek to defend the humanities to the public with reference to its hallmark discipline ("self-questioning") find themselves offering defenses in which they fail to question their own assumption of a concept, taxation, that the public, for its part (and different publics, needless to say, in different ways), *is* questioning (albeit, to be sure, with varying degrees of probity, intensity, and clarity). With a defense so self-defeating as this, is it really necessary for the humanities to await destruction from without?

How indeed should we understand the curious metonymy according to which "the public" to which humanists respond becomes implicitly figured as "the *taxpaying public*"? A loose association of this sort is not, of course, unprecedented: the office of the *publicanus*, in Roman Law, included the right to collect taxes. But what happens when taxation becomes the primary horizon for understanding the public's most basic concern, that element in public life to which one must speak inasmuch as one wishes really to speak to the public at all? More to the point, how might humanists' presuppositions about the figure of taxation—about the onus or burden taxation may or may not entail, about the toll it may or may not take on those who give it, about the relations it may or may not have to the gift—prefigure and implicitly govern the sorts of defenses humanists are inclined to give to the public of the humanities? Above all, what does it mean to be taxed, and why is it that, at a moment when the very notion of the tax seems to be the sharpest if most submerged edge of the attack on the humanities, so few humanists have elevated this notion to the level of an explicit problem for thought?

Even to be able to begin to take up these questions, to be sure, an immense amount of work would need to be done, most of which exceeds the scope of this text. One would need, for example, to inquire into the relation between the tax and the Roman Law concept of *munus*, this enigmatic term that, in a remarkable inquiry, Roberto Esposito has located as the mute but active kernel stirring within the notions of *communitas* and *immunitas*. [3] What we can and must address here, however, is the subtle but important appearance of taxation in the very text from which so many humanists today quote when they seek to defend the humanities to a skeptical public. In Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, we find a Socrates who tries to argue that the city who wants to sentence him to death for impiety actually needs him more than it supposes. Without the stings and bites of philosophic questioning, the democratic public will not know what it is talking about, will not know what it wants, and may even revert to tyranny, destroying its own democracy. As swatatable as this stinging insect, this gadfly, might be, the public therefore actually should be grateful for this strange beast, this philosopher. After this defense fails, Socrates then makes a most surprising plea to his accusers. Instead of putting him to death, Socrates argues, the public should maintain him in the Prytaneum, the sacred center of Athenian community, drawing on the public purse to exempt him from the need to procure, for himself, the basic necessities of life (food and drink). The reasoning behind this proposal is even more surprising: without the leisure (*skolen*) this exemption gives him, the philosopher will be unable to undertake the important work of acting like an animal (an aggressive insect) toward

the very public whose taxes sustain his animal life (his *zoē*). [4] After this plea fails, as it must, we eventually find the Socrates of the *Crito*, the Socrates who could but does not flee his fate, and who instead willingly accepts his own capital punishment, in ostensibly wise obedience to the laws of the city, nobly drinking the poison the city has prepared for him.

Humanists who defend the humanities to the public today sometimes invoke the words of *The Apology of Socrates* in their defenses as if the conclusion of Socrates' defense—the sentence of death—were somehow not an essential and necessary part of that defense. But *The Apology of Socrates* is, as Kierkegaard argued, precisely a *defenseless* defense: it is an ironic defense, a defense of the examined life that, on principle, seems not at all designed to succeed in the task of defending the examined life. [5] It is a defense that, in fact, seems to find redeeming value in the ironic self-consciousness with which the philosopher willingly accepts the verdict, the decision for death, that is passed upon him by the tragically uncomprehending democratic public—a public that, above all, seems not to consent to the notion that its taxes ought to be spent to maintain the life a parasitic figure who, in turn, spends his leisure-time teaching the children of the rich how to bite and sting the very host that sustains them. Repurposed as a defense of the humanities, there's no reason to believe that the Socratic defense would operate any less aporetically. Humanists' habitual recourse to the Socratic, as a paradigm for defending the humanities to the taxpaying public, instead seems structured by an insoluble impasse. To the extent we read *The Apology of Socrates* unironically, as a trial the outcome of which could have been otherwise had the proponent of the "examined life" only represented himself in court with greater wisdom, our defense of the humanities in Socratic terms betrays the very tradition and the very figure in whose name we so confidently speak. But to the extent we read it ironically, as a constitutively defenseless defense, we will have reason to worry that the Socratic paradigm will offer to the humanities little more than the consolations of a tragic narrative plot, a plot that allows the humanities to pass away, but at least having died a noble death, a death more philosophic than unphilosophic, more ironic than unironic.

That there is therefore an important sense in which the Socratic paradigm is precisely *impossible* for the humanities to inherit does not, of course, diminish its necessity or even desirability for thinking about the humanities today. What it should cause us to doubt, however, is the self-evidence of references to the Socratic within the rhetoric of the defense of the humanities, particularly inasmuch as those references imply, as they often do, that the Socratic is not only the most obvious but also the best paradigm for thinking about the humanities. There is, after all, a clear prior condition on which the Socratic paradigm may succeed in representing itself as that part of the humanities whose plan for the preservation of the humanities, such as it is, can or should represent the future of the humanities as a whole: that we leave *undefended* the many modes of humanistic inquiry that *do not* consent to the privileged status of the Socratic paradigm. Here it's necessary to keep in mind an insight offered by Bruce Robbins some years ago: the figure of an "outside public" is usually conjured up within the academe by the consummate academic insider, who then treats this figure as a premise for defining and policing the range of legitimate work that may and may not take place inside the academe. [6] But even this sort of cunning machination can't escape the impasses of inheritance we've outlined above. For if anything, the Socratic lives on most forcefully today in those threads of humanistic inquiry whose commitment to incessant questioning leads them to chew up the enthymemes of the public, up to and including the enthymeme that the Socratic tradition is a precious legacy of Western civilization that must be protected at all costs. In this case, the explicitly Socratic defense of the humanities, precisely to the extent it succeeds in persuading the taxpaying public to maintain only those humanistic inquiries that appear to conform to the Socratic mode, will run the risk of expelling from the humanities the humanities' most impious, and for that same reason most implicitly Socratic, questions. This, of course, would be tragic. But it would not be the first time in the history of disciplinary



reason that an academic discipline will have sought, as the condition for its own self-preservation, to purge from itself its excessively proximate doubles, *its scapegoats, its pharmakoi*. [7]

## 2.

By formulating the question of the humanities not in juridical terms (i.e., in terms of *apologia* or "defense"), but in terms of labor, Mowitt effects a decisive re-orientation of the Socratic paradigm: he recapitulates much more fully than do even the often complacent proponents of the Socratic paradigm one of the aporias that troubles that paradigm from within. It's well-known that the Greek term in Plato's *The Apology of Socrates* usually translated with the English "leisure" is one of those great Freudian words, a word with a forgotten, and to that same degree revealing, etymological itinerary. The word in question, *skolē*, would give rise first to the Latin *schola*, and thence, via the Latin, to more familiar terms such as "scholar" and "school." Etymologically, at least, terms like "scholarly work" or "works of scholarship" are thus the site for something very much like a *contradiction in terms*, signifying in effect a kind of work the indispensable condition for which is, especially in Plato, the very opposite of work. And whereas many if not most of today's defenders of the humanities remain silent on this aporia, preferring instead more automatic claims about the "unexamined life," Mowitt raises its contemporary iteration to the level of a problem of the first and highest order. With what terms may we speak about work that appears not to be work at all—that, even and especially in its most assiduous forms, seems to entail inactivity and idleness (or, to gloss Nietzsche, "'sitting on one's ass" [8])? And what does it mean *to speak of such work today*, at a moment not only when so many both outside and inside the academe are without work, but also when revolutions in techniques of information storage and retrieval seem to give to so many the ability to perform something very much resembling scholarly work?

The significance of Mowitt's text consists not least in his attempt to develop a lexicon to respond to such questions. It's not for nothing that the "re:" in Mowitt's "re: working" abbreviates the "re-" that many electronic mail programs automatically generate in their "Subject" heading when users indicate through keystrokes their desire to produce a "response" to an incoming message. With this, Mowitt seems to want to ask us to think "working" within the framework of late modern information technology, where, taken to the extreme, it becomes the name not of this or that particular type of work but of another aporia, this one pertaining less to "scholarly work" in the humanities than to the conditions under which that work is reproduced—or, even more to the point, the sense in which that work consists of *nothing other than* reproducibility, or at least, of reproducibility of a specific sort.

*On the one hand*, it seems axiomatic that no work in the humanities can take place that is not also, or even primarily, involved in the reproduction of this or that tradition, the transmission of this or that inheritance. This, it would seem, was one of the basic stakes in the "culture wars" that raged in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s: behind the explicit disagreement over which inheritances should be transmitted to students, there seemed to have been implicit agreement on the premise that the general function of humanities, understood now as an administrative unit within the modern university, was the reproduction and transmission of knowledge about culture. The prior conditions for knowledge's reproducibility and transmissibility, however, are that it assume the form of a trace, and that these traces, in turn, be recorded and inscribed, archived and instituted, safeguarded and storehoused, in specific sorts of technical apparatuses (primarily, but not exclusively, books and libraries). [9] If it is true that there can be no humanities without the transmissibility or reproducibility of knowledge, so too, in other words, can there be no humanities that does not in some way rely on *technē*. And although humanists habitually speak of technics as the constitutive exterior of the humanities (whether in the form of the "instrumental reason" of the

natural and social sciences, or as the "vocational-technical" training against which the humanities defined itself in the twentieth century), it thus would be more precise to say that one of the primary functions of the humanities, perhaps even its very vocation, is impossible without technics, or, in short, that technics of a certain sort is the indispensable condition for the continued existence of the humanities.

*On the other hand*, however, the humanities' presupposition of technics is precisely also the site at which the humanities seems most vulnerable to crisis, even to terminal crisis. This vulnerability, we would want to insist, is different from, though not of course unrelated to, the various crises the humanities has identified for itself as the threats that menace it in the immediate present. It's one that owes its specific torque and thrust to the "permanent crisis" of capitalist innovation, which for decades now has focused its forces nowhere more intently than on instruments of information storage and retrieval. To truly grasp the nettle of this crisis, Marx's insights into the dynamics of capitalist "permanent revolution" are, far from being antiquated, more imperative than ever. The miraculous technologies created within the framework of capitalism (such as electronic mail, whose automated "re:" Mowitt asks us to rethink) consistently produce, as one of their regularly side-effects, the potential for the increasing superfluity of certain sorts of workers (say, postal workers, whose "inflexible" contracts have been, in the U.S. at least, the source of considerable neoliberal criticism).

[10] Whence the importance of Mowitt's "re: working": de-abbreviated, it sends us a message about the need to respond to the teletechnical conditions for the crisis of "scholarly work" today. Apparatuses of information technology, on which humanistic work in the university increasingly depend and even affirm, also function to render humanistic work increasingly dispensable.

And not in the future tense, either. As various polemicists recently have made perfectly clear, the internet and its cousins give us the ability to reconcile the conflict between, on the one hand, too many universities that cannot control their rising costs and, on the other hand, too many students who cannot afford the rising costs of tuition. [11] This apparent "win-win solution" clearly will have special application in developing economies, whose need or desire to finance the creation of new institutions of higher education will be undercut, if not supplanted altogether, by the existing supply of knowledge flowing in from northern satellites, databases, and digitized archives. For these polemicists, who in effect seek to resuscitate the old Arnoldian mission of the humanities now within a horizon defined by information technology (the euphemistic watchword of which is "access") and neoliberal political economy (which reduces all to the temporariness of consumer choice under the watchword of "flexibility"), it's perfectly obvious that all this flesh, all this stiff brick and mortar, is no longer necessary or even desirable as a means for accomplishing the end, as it were, of the humanities. The screen on which these words appear, those flickering pixels there in your eye—all of this, inasmuch as it heralds the coming superfluity of the university and its workers, conveys the counterintuitive threat that a certain humanities, a radically abbreviated humanities, shall survive **the end of the university**, and this not despite but precisely because of the technics it presupposes.

All of this, it would seem, is in play in the lexicon Mowitt offers us for rethinking the specific sort of "scholarly work" the humanities entails. The decisive point would be that the forces which threaten to stifle the humanities derive less from the outside of the humanities, than from its extimate interior, from the non-identity with itself of the very "scholarly work" that defines its innermost inside. On this understanding, the conditions that allow for the humanities' normal operation also require it to remain open and exposed to the very dynamics that threaten it with with obsolescence. To protect itself against this threat (say, by reacting to the desacralizing touch of teletechnics by withdrawing from it altogether, by resacralizing the book and the experience of reading), would be to negate its very conditions of possibility, and thence too to guarantee its obsolescence (repeating, only now in contemporary forms, the

archaic esotericism of Plato's academe, Aristotle's school, or the Thomistic monastery [12]). And yet the threat is not imagined, and the liquefying, profaning energies of capitalist crisis, as experienced this time by humanists, cannot be outstripped by displacing the ailment upon scapegoats internal (the various figures of impiety today, e.g., "queer theory," "antihumanism," "postcolonialism," "cultural studies," etc.) or external ("instrumental reason," "administrators," the "taxpaying public," etc.). The predicament at the core of the crisis of the humanities is, on this read, a specific declension of the same predicament that's intensifying by the day in other domains of late modern capitalism, where the reproduction of capital demands double-or-nothing bets on constant technical innovation, and where no new technical innovation comes into being absent the potential to produce populations whose life and labor is, precisely, superfluous for capitalist reproduction. And if in recent years this crisis seems more concentrated in the university than elsewhere, not only is this no reason to defend the humanities in the usual Socratic mode; it's all the more reason *to de-automate* the humanities' response to questions about the nature of its "scholarly work," suspending our **mechanized references to paradigms of the "unexamined life,"** in order to respond now anew to the increasingly distressed experience of work of which the crisis of the humanities is, in the end, but a metonym.

### 3.

Which leads, in closing, to a thought on Mowitt's own response. If humanistic scholarship is a sort of work, and if Mowitt's discourse is an example of humanistic scholarship, then what sort of scholarly work do we find exemplified in his discourse? Of what sort of scholarly work, in other words, might Mowitt's text be paradigmatic? The difficulty of the question is hardly decreased by the fact that Mowitt's discourse unfolds not only by recalling but also by breaking with various paradigms of academic labor. What then is the paradigm for a type of scholarly work that seems to consist mainly or even exclusively of relinquishing prior paradigms of scholarly work? What sort of work is it that, by showing painstakingly how each of these paradigms dehisces from within, seems to leave us at a loss for examples to illuminate our work? And what if loss, or at least some relation to loss, were in fact an essential part of this work? What if, in other words, work in the humanities were to consist in a relationship not only to the texts of the past, as some humanists claim, but more precisely to texts that imply the death of their author and addressee (or, in other words, *all* texts [13])? Would we then agree that no fully self-conscious work in the humanities could proceed without recognizing the extent to which it entails the work of mourning?

What work is that? Writing in the wake of World War I, not long before Walter Benjamin began writing his great work on *Trauerspiel*, Freud began outlining a paradigm of "normal" grief in which the work of grieving (*Trauerarbeit*) entailed the work of a particular sort of remembering. Faced with the loss of an object I love (whether a loved person or some abstraction that has taken the place of a person), I recall the lost object obsessively and involuntarily, in extraordinary detail. Not despite but because of the pain involved in this recollection, I find myself able to divest myself of my libidinal "investments" in the lost object, to reinvest myself in a substitute object, and in so doing to rediscover my very desire to live, returning myself once more to the living present, where I find anew an ability, the ability to say "I," I'd lost in the pneumonia of my grief. In the case of melancholia, by contrast, my mourning-work hits up against an insuperable limit. Even, especially, in my obsessive recollections of the lost object, I can't bring myself to recall that my investments in this object consist not only of love but also of hate. I thus find that my ability to "work through" my loss is resisted by a force, my ambivalence, that I can't admit to myself, that's too great for me to recall or break through. In this "pathological" case of mourning, not only do I never recover my ability to say "I," I also begin to identify with the lost object I now interminably mourn, incorporating into

my own voice and gaze the voice and gaze of the lost object. I place myself outside of myself, over there in the darkness of my loss, the place from which I'm seen, but into which I can't see. If in the case of "normal" mourning, I decathect from the outside world, regarding it as destitute and forlorn, in the "pathological" case of melancholia, I decathect from "me," regarding my very "ego" as an abject, impoverished, and worthless thing, as refuse or waste. I continue to say "I," but in an important sense the "I" from whose standpoint I speak is no longer a living "I." It's a dead "I," an "I" that accuses me all the more constantly and mercilessly for the fact that it speaks to me from a position to which I'm unable to respond, and yet into the irreversible silence of which I'm increasingly drawn, through the agency of an awful mimesis. [14]

It is striking how closely the clinical symptoms of pathological mourning seem to resemble humanists' self-descriptions of the normal practices of humanistic work. The humanist, just like the melancholic, seems to work by taking himself as the object of an incessant criticism, turning his "subjectivity" into the "object" of a critical knowledge the techniques of which he then seeks to transmit to his students (sometimes in the form of "conscience"). The humanist, also like the melancholic, not infrequently seems to identify himself with a dead person whose name (or, more often, patronym, for much discourse on mourning is a discourse of fathers and sons) he incorporates into his account of himself, where it then functions precisely as a name for the sort of work he does (where statements of the sort, "I am a Platonist" mean nothing other than the incorporation of Plato's voice and views into one's own voice and views). For some working in the humanities, the elegiac quality of humanistic work would appear to be in no need of elaboration: the explicit purpose of the humanities, for these scholars, is to preserve existing traditions of thought—traditions that, but for the perpetual requiem that keeps them alive for generation upon generation of students, will have become lost once and for all to oblivion. For these humanists—whose work is, needless to say, the most endangered by the emergence of information retrieval systems—the more obsessive and detailed the recollection, the more faithfully the lost object is conjured up, resurrected, saved from oblivion, and transmitted to new generations, the better the humanistic work is as such. For others working in the humanities, by contrast, the point of humanistic work would seem not to be to protect against the potential loss of existing traditions, but to mourn and repair traditions that would have existed in a more robust form but for their traumatic damage, or even outright destruction, by "crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive." [15] The latter is of course very different from, even opposed to the former: the former is inclined toward a narrative of decline (that the best that has been thought and said is at risk of being degraded and lost), the latter toward a narrative of grievance (that the sufficient condition for any fully self-conscious work in the humanities is answerability for the inhumanity with which existing humanistic traditions have hitherto coexisted). But despite these differences, they seem to share a similar lexicon: loss, though of very different modalities and relating to very different traditions and objects, would seem to provide these otherwise opposed humanists with the vocabulary for speaking about their scholarly work. Humanists, on this read, would have more than a little in common with Zakes Mda's "professional mourners" [16]; they would be professional melancholics.

For at least one heterodox thinker of institutions, this would amount to more than a mere *prima facie* resemblance. In his 1977 essay "The Institution of Rot," Michel de Certeau outlined the subjective conditions of possibility for institutions that seek to reproduce and transmit such high ideals such as "meaning, right, or truth." [17] On de Certeau's account, the public work of these institutions depends on a prior work, an intimate and even secret work, a particular sort of work of the self upon the self. Before I'm able to fill myself with the great voices and views I then reproduce and transmit in and to the public, I first must convert myself into an empty vessel capable of containing those voices and views. But the prior work by which I accomplish this conversion is nothing other than the abjection that is the hallmark of melancholia: only by first establishing for myself that "I'm not worthy" am I then able to

hollow myself out in the manner demanded of me by my institution's public dimension, turning myself into a receptacle capable of hosting a voice and gaze that, in contrast to my own, do possess value. Melancholic dispositions (affects of filth, corruption, and putrescence) are thus the indispensable condition for the transmission of sublime inheritances, for the conversion of the self into one of those technical apparatuses that's able to operate as a device for the transmissibility of tradition. Far from being *the opposite* of technics, melancholia is here the mode or mood *specific to* technics, at least a technics of a very specific sort: it's the primary means through which institutions of "meaning, right, and truth" administer the "rot" they secretly require (but also, of course, publicly disavow) as the subjective condition for their normal operation.

Mowitt is, needless to say, anything but silent on the work of mourning. He begins by explicitly placing his inquiry into the university under the interpretive key of the Benjaminian figure of "ruins," which he takes up from a scholar, Bill Readings, who died before his time; and he ends by discussing how it is that we might think death and negativity without the consolations of dialectical reason. But even though Mowitt's response "re: working" seems therefore to participate in the work of mourning, it would be off the mark to treat this proximity as an identity. To affirm the work of the humanities, as Mowitt invites us to, it would seem necessary to render inoperative the apparatus of professional melancholia. More to the point, it would seem necessary to think the trace of death entailed in every text—up to and including the sort of trace that, in the age of teletechnical information storage and retrieval, allows for the death of the humanities. This would be a trace that the institution administers in its subjects, that it sets to work upon us and sets us in turn to work upon, but that, despite or because of its status as the dead center of scholarly work in the humanities, the institution cannot think on its own terms. From this perspective, the most exemplary work of Mowitt's text would be its resistance to and distance from the very paradigm of grief-work to which its "re: working" is otherwise so constantly close. It's as if the work of mourning were even the main sort of work that humanists need to rework in order to begin affirming their work, as if the future of the humanities would begin when we can affirm even, especially, the loss of the discourse of loss. As if, rather than continue to work in an institution of rot, we could inaugurate instead a relation to text that, existing as it does at the vanishing point between *Trauerarbeit* and *Trauerspiel*, between a certain kind of work and a certain kind of play, in turn heralds an experience, that of unalienated labor, the very idea of which our self-destructive democracies seem to need, today more than ever, to ridicule and to deny.